

## **Antelope Valley Press**

### **Denser housing: Cure for crush?**

*This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press on Sunday, April 24, 2005.*

**By LISA WAHLA HOWARD**

**Valley Press Staff Writer**

MONROVIA - NIMBYs may hate it, and elected leaders may fear it, but if we want our children and our moderate-income workforce to be able to live in Southern California, higher-density housing is the way of the future.

That was the message from a variety of housing experts Thursday at a regional housing summit organized by the Southern California Association of Governments.

The construction of more housing units, and more densely packed, is the only way to keep up with population growth and high demand that has pushed the state's median home price up to \$471,000, summit attendees were told.

At that price, society's worker bees - teachers, firefighters, office and service workers - are struggling to afford homes even in outlying areas often labeled "affordable."

The median price of a high desert house jumped 40.5% from February 2004 to February 2005, from \$183,196 to \$257,325, according to the California Association of Realtors.

Affordability is no longer a problem just for low-income residents but even for moderate-income families who make a good living, said Richard Lambros, CEO of the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

"Southern Californians need homes. It is that simple," Lambros said. "We are fighting legal barriers, social barriers, regional barriers and political barriers to let them have this piece of the American dream."

Lucetta Dunn, who heads the state's Department of Housing and Community Development, encouraged communities to plan for their own growth.

Other conference participants urged city leaders to change zoning rules and general plans to allow more housing at higher densities. Also, planners want local governments to assess fees on new developments on a per-square-foot basis rather than per-unit, to encourage smaller, more affordable units.

"Our planning and zoning are in place for a city that is long gone, or for some other part of America," planner John Fregonese said.

"Los Angeles is a world-city, and the days of ample vacant land are long gone. We need to look at how they do housing in Paris or Rome where it is dense, urban and very livable."

For urban areas, planners are pushing mixed-use developments combining retail and office space on the ground floor with apartments above, and in-fill projects that replace dilapidated, underutilized properties with multi-family housing.

In the areas with land left - the high desert and the Inland Empire are the prime examples - panelists said civic leaders must get past the idea that higher density means higher crime rates, more traffic and a lower quality of life.

"There's tremendous activity in Palmdale, Lancaster, Santa Clarita, Hemet, San Jacinto, Victorville," said Randall Lewis, a real estate expert who handles marketing for a development corporation.

"Thousands of acres are being gobbled up with jurisdictions saying, 'Let's keep building on 7,200-square-foot lots, because that's what people want.'

"These non-strategic areas now will be the strategic areas in 10 years, and we will look back at the resources we're wasting as a terrible thing we're doing now," he said.

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford strongly disagreed with Lewis' contention, saying his city's general plan accommodates the city's housing needs. "The panelists want to move all that growth here, take the increasing density and move it to the high desert," Ledford said. "We said we aren't interested."

"We have a very low ratio of apartments to single-family homes, and that's what our residents say they want. When it comes down to it, the community should have that self-determination."

Palmdale Planning Director Laurie Lile said the city doesn't have many developers asking to build multi-family projects; in most parts of the city, density is capped at 16 dwelling units per acre.

Palmdale has had its share of problems stemming from high-density housing in its urban core, where crime and gangs make headlines and keep sheriff's deputies busy, Ledford said.

"Our downtown is not an example that will have people changing their minds," Ledford said. "The high-density, low-amenity developments there are an example of what we don't want."

"Up here it doesn't matter if (the higher-density project is) low-income or market rate, the people don't want it," he said.

"Santa Clarita has a lot of developments of moderate density with high amenities, and that may be the answer. You have to demonstrate these complexes aren't going to produce the kind of social nightmares they don't want."